

INTERVIEW I

DATE: June 14, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: JACK VALENTI

INTERVIEWER: T. H. BAKER

PLACE: His office in Washington

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B: This is the interview with Jack Valenti.

Sir, do you recall when you first met Mr. Johnson?

V: Yes, I do. I met him sometime in, I believe, about 1957. I met him in Houston. The locale was a coffee, I think is what it was called. It was in the afternoon of a weekday. It was organized by Warren Woodward. Its objective was, as Woody told me, for the then-Majority Leader to meet with young people in Houston, particularly young men under forty who were in business or in the professions, that he had not known and with whom he might find some future rapport. I assumed it to be a rather normal conclave where a very prominent politician was wanting to widen his political spectrum and meet new young people to gain new allies, to add to his cadre of supporters in Houston. But I must say that I was not unattended by any doubts.

B: You had some knowledge of Mr. Johnson before then?

V: Yes, I had. My knowledge of him was almost like any, I suppose, average, intelligent man, reading the papers and being aware of him. I'd followed his career in Texas, but peculiarly enough until that afternoon, I really had never seen him in person and surely had never talked to him. So this first afternoon, again my memory could be wrong but I believe it was at the Shamrock Hotel--it might have been some place else, I can't remember--

I think the Shamrock; there were about thirty-five of us there. The Majority Leader greeted each one of us and then stood in the center of the room and talked for about thirty or forty minutes and answered questions from those who were there about the political environment of that time. I must say I was quite struck by him, I thought he was strong, he was greatly articulate, I liked the way he looked and stood, I liked what he said; in short, I was really taken with him. At that time I was writing a weekly column for The Houston Post, and I recall, as have other writers who have written about me recalled, that I wrote a column about the then-Majority Leader in which I prophesied great things for him, a sort of nonsequitur, I suppose.

But at any rate, I can sum up by saying I met him, I was greatly attracted to him, and thereafter, having felt like I knew the man, I became one of his enlarging circle of supporters in Houston who were available for volunteer chores of one kind or another.

B: Did you hear from Mr. Johnson about the column?

V: Yes, I did. I got a letter from him, expressing delight in it; it was a nice warm letter and I was quite pleased by it. I still have it, as a matter of fact.

But essentially I dealt with the then-Majority Leader--dealt is really a rather exaggerated word, whenever I was involved in anything concerning him I moved through Warren Woodward who at that time had moved to Houston and was with a savings and loan association there.

B: Were you involved with or associated with any of the various groupings in Texas' factional politics at the time?

V: No, not really. I did not have any resolute and fierce ideologies. I was attracted to men rather than these ever changing and sometimes bizarre

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issues. I do recall that before I had ever met Lyndon Johnson, I was involved in the battle of the precincts in 1956, in which he and the Speaker, Mr. Rayburn, were engaged in a death struggle with Allan Shivers. I recall at that time that I was involved in that, and I was living in the southwest part of Houston and voting in a fire station precinct there. I remember that I was part of a precinct group which carried our precinct at that time for the Johnson-Rayburn faction.

B: Then after this meeting in the late fifties, did you have any direct personal contact with Mr. Johnson between then and '60?

V: No. Again, not really. Every time the Majority Leader would come to Texas I would be at the airport with several hundred people, and I would attend whatever function that he was involved in.

My next intimate connection with him came in 1960 when, again working through Warren Woodward and John Singleton, who's now a federal judge, I was anxious to be involved in the 1960 convention.

B: Let me ask one question before you get into that, sir. When did you first see signs or hear talk about Lyndon Johnson as a possible presidential candidate?

V: You remind me of an instance that had almost slipped my mind. I was present in Washington the day that Senator Johnson made his speech entering the race. It was a peculiar thing. My real associate in Washington and the man that I felt closest to and the one that was really my touchstone in the political world was an extraordinary man named Albert Thomas, who was the congressman from the eighth congressional district and rose to become a very powerful and persuasive force in the House. I really was

the chief Thomas lieutenant in Houston, managed all of his campaigns, such as they were, because he had very little opposition.

But I recall that I was in Washington visiting Albert Thomas, and this would be, I suppose, in the early part of 1960, whenever it was that the Senator made his announcement. I was in Thomas' office and the Congressman said to me, "Would you like to go with me to" some chamber, I don't ever recall where it was--I suppose it was in the Senate Office Building someplace--"to hear Lyndon Johnson, I think he's going to announce for President." I leaped at that, I thought that was crashing good stuff.

So I bounced over with Congressman Thomas, lost him in the jostle of the crowd and found my way to a seat and sat there. I recall that everybody was craning their necks and all of a sudden I saw a few people walk out. As a matter of fact, it might have been one of the first times that I saw my future wife. I saw this very lovely girl walk out of the side door, take her place in the front row, and then out strides the Majority Leader, in which he made his announcement that he was going to run for President.

At this time in my life I really was disengaged from the Johnson circle. I had never met John Connally, for example. I knew few people in the Johnson entourage, though I was a Johnson man and though I supported him vigorously and wholeheartedly and without reservation. I literally was on the darker edges of the last ring of the peripheral circle. Singleton and Woodward were my grappling hooks to the Johnson bow and stern. So at that time I couldn't tell you who was there because I did not know the names and the faces. I recall seeing Mary Margaret.

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And I remember I was quite taken with this very dramatic moment: this very strong and gifted man making his announcement to make the run for the presidency. At that time I must confess that I was rather naive about national politics and I assumed that he had a good chance to win. I learned later when I hit the convention in 1960 in Los Angeles that there really was no chance to win, that it was pretty much all locked up and had been for some time. But at that moment I was struck by two things: one, that one of my heroes was running for the presidency; and two, that there was a spectacular chance that he could make it.

So that really is the only time that I guess I saw him.

My next time, we were talking about the campaign, was--

B: Was that the convention itself?

V: The convention--excuse me--first. I had consulted with Singleton and Woodward and was anxious to be a part of "the working cadre there." They got back in touch with me and said, "Fine, you'll work at the convention, come ahead."

I found that my duties at the convention were fairly non-existent. I was put in touch with a man that I met for the first time named Leonard Marks, and another man about whom I had read a great deal and met for the first time, a man named Jim Rowe. They were in charge of soliciting delegates for the convention. Leonard Marks then asked me if I would make some calls in the

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New York delegation. I look back on that now with a great deal of amusement because it was sending me out to find a very small needle in a very large haystack, when I couldn't even find the haystack.

I recall that I went over to the Ambassador Hotel. I was given the names of four delegates that I was going to make this big pitch to and convince them to vote for Johnson. Two of the delegates were black delegates, and they were irretrievably committed to John Kennedy. Then I talked to two other men, both of whom I found out later were hack politicians out of New York, and they were going where they thought the power was and it looked to them at that time that Johnson didn't have a chance to win and so they gave me a brushoff.

I went home rather bedraggled and reported that I had seen four delegates and had gotten no votes and didn't even come close to scoring. I found out at the time that I wasn't doing as badly as I thought because out of the New York delegation I think we probably got two or three or four or five votes. Ed Weisl, Sr., whom I hadn't met then, was really the only top man in the Johnson organization that was in New York. So that was the sum total of my delegate hunting.

B: Incidentally, at that time, was the Johnson effort there kind of a forlorn hope, or was there still belief that he could get the nomination?

V: You see, I found out an interesting thing. I've participated in three conventions in my life--'60, '64, and '68. My participation, my power quotient in that '60 convention as compared to '64 and even to '68 on a scale of one to a hundred, I was at one hundred in '64 and I might have been at eighty in '68, I must have been at minus zero in '60. Because being in the outer dimly lit edges, one never knows what's going on at the convention. I didn't have the slightest idea, except when I

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would mingle with people and listen, it was quite evident that the Senate Majority Leader was not doing well in the delegate search. It became very clear that the Kennedy organization was well oiled, well staffed, and well prepared, even to an untutored eye like my own at that time.

But the main thrust of what I'm saying is that my vantage point in '64 and '68 was of such clarity that I could see what was going on. In 1960 it was so befuzzed and so sort of fogged over that one would be unable to know what was going on. I was simply eight light years away from where the action was and simply had no way of knowing.

B: Could you feel atmospheres? For example, was there any bitterness between the Kennedy groups and the Johnson groups?

V: I never saw the candidates, either one of them, in the entire convention. I saw Kennedy one day walking through the lobby of the hotel and people screeching. I never saw Lyndon Johnson. Well, I take that back. I did see them both. I was present, squatting on my haunches by having bulldozed my way to the front row, when Senator Kennedy and Senator Johnson addressed the Texas delegation. But I must say at that time I would have given the palm to John Kennedy in an objective way because I thought he was calm and bemused, a little witty, a dry sardonic wit. Senator Johnson I thought was much too uptight about it all. He was playing it very, very seriously because it was serious to him and he

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was an underdog on his way up. Senator Kennedy played it loose, almost affectionate, as it he knew he had it wrapped up and he was merely trying not to be insulting or to be vicious or even to be critical of the Majority Leader.

I remember when Senator Johnson was reciting all of the things that he had done and how Senator Kennedy was never there, was always absent, Senator Kennedy got up and he said, "I think that Senator Johnson is absolutely right. There's no question about him being the greatest Majority Leader that I've ever seen. He's right. I didn't make a very good senator as far as he's concerned. That's why I'm proposing that we keep him where he's best as Majority Leader and let me go on to something where I can do better, which is President." That scored a big point, I thought.

At any rate, I was disappointed and I was saddened and sort of like the supporter who wants to go and weep because his candidate is going down the tubes. That's pretty much the way I felt at that time because I thought in this hostile Indian territory, as far as Kennedy was concerned, he handled himself with great aplomb, and that Johnson did not score, as I hoped he would.

But that's the only two times that I had seen the candidates at that convention.

B: There has been talk that there was a good deal of unhappiness among some of the Texans after Mr. Johnson accepted the vice presidential nomination.

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V: I've heard that. Again, it's interesting from my viewpoint. I must say I thought it was absolutely sensational. I couldn't believe it when I saw it on the television. Later on, as I talked to people in Texas, I found that they were unhappy, but the unhappy people I met were the Kennedy people. Some of the liberal Kennedy supporters were very unhappy with the choice of Johnson.

B: You mean the Kennedy people in Texas?

V: No, the Kennedy people at the convention. As I recall, the anti-Johnson forces who were at the convention were for Stevenson. I remember Mrs. [Frankie] Randolph and Bob Eckhardt and Ronnie Dugger and that crowd were for Stevenson, not for Kennedy. I ran into some people in the hotel who were mostly oriented toward the Michigan group, Soapy Williams and Walter Reuther. They were very upset at the choice of Johnson. I never will forget being in the hotel that night and listening to this fervor of their discontent about this.

B: Later, after you got closer to Mr. Johnson, did you ever discuss with him the question about which there has been much speculation of why he took the offer of the vice presidential post?

V: Not in so many words. I've heard him speak about it. I have my own feelings why. I think Mrs. Johnson wanted him to, I think that she felt like the vice presidential post would be a less onerous post. The way Lyndon Johnson ran the Senate, now that I know a great deal about this operation, is really the only way that you can be a great leader in the Senate, and that is to devote enormous

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amounts of time and effort, literally working around the clock. For a great majority leader must not only be a parliamentary master and know the legislation, but he must also know his legislators, which means that you have to do a great deal of talking, you have to have intelligence sources, you've got to know who is irritated today, who is vexed, who may be waxing expansive, when is the time to make your move to enlist the aid of certain people. All of this is not done with magic formulas or magic wands. It's done by the dint of extraordinary hard work and the expenditure of vast amounts of energy. This kind of toil exacts its toll. I suspect that Mrs. Johnson felt that this would be a place for him to be where his galvanic energies would be harnessed a little better, where he would have a chance to live a lot longer because the kind of pace that he was carrying on in the Senate was one calculated to bring even the stoutest stallion to his knees after awhile, although it didn't seem to affect him.

But the heart attack in 1955 I suspect really preyed on Mrs. Johnson's mind. You must recall that that was little more than four and a half years after that heart attack. I suspect that's one thing.

The President many times when I was listening to him pointed out that one does not turn down the candidate for the presidency of the United States; that this is a duty, a larger duty than any of your personal tastes are. My own judgment is, I don't believe that Lyndon Johnson ever thought he would be President once he became Vice President. I think there's no question about it, that he expected to live out eight years of his vice presidency and then probably retire at age 60, because that would have been his age. Finish out this January 20, '69 and he would go home as

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Vice President. I know when I talked to him during his vice presidential days, he made this very clear and almost said it. I think that he felt that strongly.

I know he often said that no man born in the South would ever be nominated for President in his lifetime. I think he felt that prophecy was vindicated in Los Angeles in 1960, and that prophecy would be still a healthy one as far as he was concerned during his lifetime.

Then, three, I think that he felt--now this is more instinct, what I'm saying now, than actual fact--a majority leader under a Democratic president is far more constrained, fettered, on leash, than a majority leader under a Republican president. I think it's fair to state that Lyndon Johnson was probably the second most powerful man in the nation when Eisenhower was President. He recognized that he could not be that powerful if Kennedy won the election. Now, you might say, "Well, Nixon would have won and then he'd still be Majority Leader." Well, that's exactly what would have happened! I think that became very clear when Lyndon Johnson ran for both offices. He really was giving himself an option, and, indeed, making certain that there was an escape hatch, for if Kennedy had lost, he, Lyndon Johnson, would have established that he responded to his candidate's command; he campaigned as hard as any man could campaign; they lost, but it was no fault of Johnson. Then he could go back into the Senate and take up the reigns as Majority Leader.

That's the way I size it up. I'm not too sure which of those is the most powerful influence. I daresay that in a decision like this I know that Lyndon Johnson would have instinctively reached out for the opinion of Lady Bird. He always has in moments of great crisis like this. Feeling

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that I understand the way she felt, I suspect she had a great deal to do with his acceptance, or at least she was a persuasive influence in the acceptance of the second post, because at the outset there were a great many powerful and influential allies who were opposed to this, as I learned subsequently.

B: That would have been people like John Connally?

V: John Connally and Price Daniel and, indeed, Sam Rayburn. The President tells very amusing stories about Bob Kerr, how much he was opposed to it etc., etc. That leads me to suspect that, against that onslaught of almost unanimous advice opposing the acceptance, then logic tells me he would have had to have had some really staunch and powerful influence on the other side, and the only person I can think of who would bear that specification is Mrs. Johnson.

B: Yes, others have indicated the same thing.

V: Mind you, what I'm telling you is a kind of a mosaic which has been put into place by bits and fragments of conversation; by my increasingly intimate knowledge of how the President relies on his wife, his own temperament and characters, his own great respect, enormous respect, for the office of the presidency and candidates for the presidency. His belief in duty and fidelity to a cause and to a party all tell me that this is probably the way it happened.

B: On into the campaign your agency, Weekley and Valenti, had the account in Texas, didn't they?

V: Yes, and I think again Warren Woodward had a great deal to do with that. It went this way. Woody asked me to come to Austin. I remember that I went to Austin because Woody asked me if I wanted to take part in this campaign. He said that "the Senator is determined that he's not going

to lose Texas, and he wants to make sure that all roadblocks are up against defecting Democrats. He wants to make sure that every piece of organizing influence and every brain and every imaginative wit" that was available was enlisted in this cause. I am not clear the chronology of how it all went, but as I recall, I told Woody that I was available and I'd talk it over with Weldon Weekley and we determined that we would do it, and that I would be the instrument through which our agency would handle this.

B: May I ask, sir, were you being asked to donate your services?

V: Oh, no. I was in professional services and I couldn't, being a small agency, take that time off without any income to the agency. No, we made a deal, as I recall, and I think I made it through Woody, and the deal was that we would handle the advertisement, placing ads in Texas, both print and broadcast, and that I would work full-time on the campaign.

Then I went back to Austin. I recall this very vividly--that Senator Johnson was on the phone to Woody; we were in the Driskill Hotel. There were maybe a dozen of the then, I identified later as the Johnson men there. Woody was talking to the Senator. Then he said, "The Senator wants to talk to you, Jack."

When I got on the phone, I probably had never had a private telephone conversation with Lyndon Johnson in 1960, up to that time. My conversations with him had always been with other people in a large room. So I could probably say this was the first time that we talked face-to-face over the phone, as it were. I remember vividly his saying to me: "Now, we're trusting you with a big responsibility. I just want you to know that we're willing to spend a lot of money in Texas, but I want that money well spent. I don't want it wasted. I want you to know that we

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are not going to lose this state, and whatever you're going to do is going to be aimed toward that objective. I want you to work twenty-four hours a day." I found out later that that was no Johnson hyperbole. He literally meant twenty-four hours a day, and essentially sort of made me sign in blood on that telephone, which I did. "Yes, sir; yes, sir." And the race was on.

We involved ourselves in a number of ads and organizing; I moved around the state.

My next contact with Johnson came in Dallas in the middle of the campaign. I had set up a videotaping for television spots. We were doing it at a Dallas studio, a commercial TV studio. I flew to Dallas. I had worked for a week, writing these spots.

I think the campaign in Texas, as I recall it, if I look back on it now with a little more professionalism, was rather untidily managed. Nobody seemed to really know what they wanted to do. I think there was a tendency to be fearful of the Majority Leader and nobody wanted to take the initiative, really step out with something. I say that because I was mostly on my own in the direction of the campaign. I didn't get too much advice from anybody. If you're going to cut ten spots, what should they be on, what should he say, what should be the aim and the thrust of these!

I worked up some spots and had them all written, got to the studio--again, Woody was there--and we got things arranged. Then, like a great tornado coming out of the sky, the Johnson motorcade descended on this studio. It was the first time I had met Bill Moyers. He was traveling with the Majority Leader. He leaped out of the car, very serious looking, and leaped to a telephone and began to talk into this phone,

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while the Majority Leader strides into the studio and said, "All right, let's see what we're going to do." As luck would have it, they weren't ready with the cameras; a camera broke down or some lights didn't work and that irritated him a great deal. He calls me over and wants to know why this was so screwed up. Well, it was screwed up.

But this was my first confrontation with the Johnson passion for perfection. It was not to be my last by a long shot, but I had no way of knowing that.

B: Did he give you a chance to reply?

V: I did reply, as I recall, but in a rather fumbling way because what I was trying to do was to let him know that; a) it wasn't my fault; b) it was an act of God, neither of which he accepted and neither of which satisfied him.

By that time somebody else came in and diverted his attention and I met with the studio manager. Finally, to make a long story short, we got underway.

We had all of these on teleprompter. Then he wanted to know who wrote these blankety-blank lousy things. I very timidly timorously raised my hand, whereupon he told me that these weren't worth two-bits. So then he dispatches Bill Moyers and two other people that I don't recall to redo them in the way he likes them, "in my style," he said. At that time I didn't know what the Johnson style was, so I was operating in the dark. I must say that I think he was absolutely correct, which is another asset

of Lyndon Johnson; that many times when he's critical, he's also correct, and we must never place too small value on that. He was correct, because as I look back on it these messages were weak and flacid and feckless and they had no bite and no hardness to them, and they just weren't worth a damn and he instantly appraised them as such.

In about half an hour, Moyers came back with some other young man, whose name I still don't know to this hour.

B: What was Mr. Johnson doing in that half-hour?

V: He was on the phone. He got on the phone and made some calls. They put him in a little room and got him some cold drink, and he was fussing with the appurtenances of the campaign. Then he did those commercials. I recall he was very restless, though; he didn't want to shoot them more than once or twice. It was true, we were about two hours behind schedule; he had other things to do.

As a result, my first real intimate association with Johnson was a total fiasco, from beginning to end. Though later, when I saw the spots on TV, they were not nearly as bad as I thought they were going to be. I thought that they were adequate, I'll put it that way. They wouldn't win any Emmy Award or anything like that.

At any rate, he vanished from the scene and the campaign went on.

B: Were you generally on your own in all of the advertising you did, the other print and broadcast ads?

V: Pretty much.

B: In both content and placement?

V: That's right. We did a great deal of assistance in the organizing of the campaign in Harris County and throughout the state.

B: Was there any particular difficulty involved in the fact that Mr. Johnson

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was running for two positions? Senator and Vice President?

V: Not at all. There was no problem there as far as the voters were concerned. Everybody understood that the big run for the roses was the presidency, and everybody believed that no matter what happened to the presidential campaign that Johnson would indeed win handily the post as senator, which he did. And the results showed while we carried the state by less than 46,000 votes, Johnson won by an overwhelming majority, beating John Tower, so that prediction was borne out by the facts.

B: Down in Harris County were you able to get the Texas liberal faction to come over to the Democratic candidate?

V: No, we never were, really. We lost Harris County, but we lost it by much less than we expected. We lost it, as I recall, by about 20,000 votes; we expected to lose it by 30 or 40,000 votes. So in a sense, we did better than we expected, but nonetheless it was not a healthy thing. We lost Harris County and Dallas County, and as we expected to do in Dallas, by a large majority, but the Harris County thing was a source of some discontent to us.

B: In your advertising campaign, did you take advantage of the episode in Dallas?

V: Oh, yes, we moved on that very well and moved on it throughout the state. As I recall, we did some radio things. Sometimes you can't change print that fast, but I do recall that in Harris County we got out some fliers and direct mail immediately and made a great deal to do of that.

I don't have my records or any notes that I have of that campaign with me, but I must say, as I'm sitting here, it's amazing how much of a blur a good part of it is. Sometimes I think I'd like to sit with my partner and other people and sort of recount. At this moment I can't

even recall who was the state chairman--I'm trying to think of that. I can't even recall who was chairman of the Harris County campaign. It's terrifying to find my memory slipping like that.

B: Did you do any traveling with Mr. Johnson himself?

V: No, I did not.

(Interruption)

B: We were talking about the '60 campaign, what you call the blur of the '60 campaign. Anything else stand out? Did you see Mr. Johnson again any other time?

V: I saw him when he made speeches, but not really. Well, I'll give you one other example of some of the things we did. I spent a good deal of time working in the Harris County arena, as well as statewide. I remember that I was involved in setting up a big women's tea at the Shamrock-Hilton. Mrs. Shriver came down and Mrs. Robert Kennedy came down. I remember that was the first time that the Kennedy women were involved in this, and we set up a big affair at the Shamrock. I was the emcee and introduced them. We had a couple or three thousand women turn out for that and it got us some good publicity.

My other interesting affair was that my agency handled the statewide hook-up of the celebrated confrontation between John Kennedy and the Protestant ministers, which was in the then Crystal Ballroom of the Rice Hotel. We set up this statewide network, and I remember that was the first time that I had met Larry O'Brien and Ken O'Donnell. They came in. I went over the format for it, got it all set up, and we had the ministers on view. I recall that I sat in the back of the room where my people could get to me. Then I remember that Mrs. Lawford came in and sat behind me, and I explained to her what was going on.

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B: That's Mrs. Pat Lawford?

V: Yes, Patricia Kennedy Lawford. Then at precisely the right moment John Kennedy strode in alone, unaccompanied by anybody, and kicked off what turned out to be a really probably tide-turning in the campaign, not merely in Texas but literally throughout the nation. So that turned out well.

But I had no more contact of the kind I had in Dallas with the Majority Leader during the campaign.

I recall that I flew to New York to visit with friends of mine, to listen to the election returns, so I was in New York City on the night of the election. These friends of mine, a former movie actress that I had gotten to know--her husband and she were having an election night party, and I remember that's where I was on the night that Johnson and Kennedy won.

B: And carried Texas.

V: And carried Texas.

B: Was that a surprise incidentally? It was a close thing.

V: It was so close, so very close. I felt good because, number one, I felt like the Vice President would be pleased, he was vindicated, and we'd carried his state, and that my small modest part in the campaign then would be a cheerful one rather than one that was dolorous at all.

One other thing which I'll tell you which, again, is great in contrast. I'm a perfect example in a study of political contrast, as far as nearness to power is concerned. I attended the '61 inauguration with a friend of mine named Jake Williams. We got us a room in Washington at the Marriott Motel, which right now is three minutes from my home but at that time a long way from my home. The reason why I was with Jake Williams

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was because he knew some of the Kennedy sisters, and I thought that he would be a great one to get me involved. We came up and, again, we were about as disinvolved as anybody can be.

A few things stand out. I remember I went to a reception for the new Vice President at the Statler or the Sheraton Park--I don't know what hotel it was now--which was notable because I saw again Mary Margaret. She was there with some young fellow, I saw her from a distance and I nodded to her and she nodded back, really not recognizing me I suppose. But I never did see Lyndon Johnson.

Then Jake Williams and I went to the gala. We each bought us a ticket, and Jake was going to get us a good seat because of his great connections with the Kennedys. As you imagine, we were so far back that a nuclear bomb going off in that armory would have left us beyond the fall-out line.

I saw within the space of four years, involving two inaugurations, and with the disparate view of them as one could possibly get.

B: Did the people who worked in the Texas campaign ever get any kind of thank yous from Mr. Johnson, letters or--?

V: I did. He was very good about that. Whenever I saw him after that, he really knew me now and was always very kind about it, very kind.

B: I don't want to pry into your personal life, but somewhere about in here you must have moved closer to at least the Johnson group; you were just about one year from getting married, I think.

V: Oh, yes. I met Mary Margaret during the '60 campaign, and then in 1961 Lyndon Johnson came to Texas to make a speech at the Rice Hotel in that same Crystal Ballroom. Again, Woody Woodward and the other man who played a great part with me in this was Lloyd Hand. Lloyd Hand and Woody Woodward were very, very close to Johnson and mostly everything I did that

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touched Johnson moved through them first.

But I went out there with Woody to greet the Vice President. Mary Margaret got off the airplane and I was very struck with her, of course, again. The Vice President suggested that Mary Margaret ride into town with us, which she did, and we chatted. Then I sat next to her at the lunch and chatted some more.

At that time I was involved with some clients who were having some business in Washington, and I was dealing with Albert Thomas for help in getting appointments for me which he was very pleased to do. So I began to make more trips to Washington. This was the summer of '61. In the fall of '61 I think I probably had my first date with Mary Margaret and proceeded then to go to Washington far more than my business really demanded. I was going up there once every two weeks and spending a couple of days and spending it with her, going out and having dinner.

B: Miss Wiley was working for the Vice President?

V: She was the secretary to the Vice President. As a matter of fact, when he was Majority Leader and Vice President, her office was inside his office so she was very near the power center.

Then there came an interesting weekend in the fall of '61. Mary Margaret would go to the Ranch with the Johnsons and they were always trying not to have her be alone and so they said, "Why don't you have somebody come up and spend the weekend with us and we'll go hunting," and that sort of thing. So she suggested, how about me, and the Vice President said, "Wonderful."

I came up. And I remember that Bill Hobby and his wife--Bill Hobby, as you know, is the editor of The Houston Post--I remember that weekend with crystal clarity because of two things. One, it was the first time

that I had really had a chance to sort of spend an intimate social time with the Vice President; and it was the beginning of a serious relationship between Mary Margaret and myself. I remember that the Vice President was very jocular and in one of these marvelous humorous moods of his where he's very funny. When he chooses to be, President Johnson is probably one of the really funny humorous men that I know. He's a very funny man, particularly in mimicry and story-telling and in throw-away lines, they say in show biz. But he really is a man of tremendous humorous vitality.

B: Can you give some examples from that?

V: It's difficult to give examples. It's not so much wit--

B: I gather you can't reproduce it.

V: You can't reproduce it because it's like you and I telling a story, or, let's say, myself. I'd tell the story and it has a kind of dull clod to it, and the President tells the story and it is just hilarious. It's funny. He acts out the parts. Particularly so many of these stories are about the Criders and the people in Johnson City and his boyhood. He has got a kind of humorous story to illustrate a point.

But at any rate he was in one of those moods this weekend. We went hunting. I am not a hunter; I can barely point a gun in the right direction and if it comes within a hundred yards of the target, I claim it to be marksmanship medal type shooting.

He put me in the back seat with Mary Margaret and he and Mrs. Johnson in the front seat, and off we go in a caravan of cars, bouncing off through the meadows to hunt deer. It was in the last hours of the afternoon, and in one of his pastures a big buck showed up and the President got out of the car and got me out of the car and said, "Now, by God,

let's see Valenti. He's a great advertising man, now let's see if he can shoot a deer." I must have poured eight shells through that chamber and through that barrel and I shot all around that deer. After he stopped jumping a little bit, then the deer became transfixed at the abysmal marksmanship of anybody, and I think the deer became rather puzzled by it all and began to take an interest in the whole thing by just standing shock-still and seeing where the shells were finally going. That caused great hilarity, caused me some disappointment because Mary Margaret was laughing. She thought that was funny and of course the President thought that was just about the funniest thing he had ever seen. So this got us through a couple of days. When the conversation lagged, we brought up the subject of my marksmanship. At any rate, that was the beginning of the relationship on a basis that was intimate.

After that, I was traipsing to Washington very frequently. I guess about April, Mary Margaret and I were talking about getting married. I remember that the Vice President, while he found me amusing as a hunting companion and as a sometime date for Mary Margaret, took a totally different view of a marriage, which was going to unfetter his secretary and have her go off with some character from Houston and leave him bereft of her as an aide and colleague. This found a rather unwelcome reception in his mind.

B: I gather he let you know about this.

V: He let me know, not in a mean way but always tinged in humor. But he let me know. I recall one time a scene that was so ludicrous I cannot tell you. I came up to have lunch with Mary Margaret and she was sitting of course in the Vice President's office and he wasn't there. She was in the Old Senate Office Building where the Majority Leader was--

and I was peeking my head inside the door of the inner reception room to find out when Mary Margaret was going to be available. Then I went inside the inner reception room and I'd peek inside the big office of the Vice President, and her office was right near the door. It began to bother me. We were about fifteen minutes late getting out and I thought, well, what on earth could she be doing! So I go stealthily to the Vice President's door and open it up, and it's kind of like a French comedy or one of those Marx Brothers comedies that is silly and yet it happens. As I open the door to peek in, the Vice President is opening the door to look out. Our eyes collided, not our faces because he stands a foot higher than me. But I looked at him and he looked at me and surprise was his reaction. I know that I shouldn't have, but all I did, I looked at him, I dropped my hand off the knob and I bolted for the outer door and literally fled through that big reception room. A little tableau that even now he's fond of recalling.

But once, I think, that Mary Margaret determined to leave and he knew she was going to get married, he couldn't have been nicer, just couldn't have been warmer, gentler, kinder, which was climaxed of course by his traveling to Houston to give her away and to come to the reception, which was held at my partner's house.

B: Does Mr. Johnson tend to dominate an affair like that?

V: Well, not deliberately, but you must remember that St. Anne's Church on Westheimer Street in Houston, southwest section, is not usually the host to the Vice President of the United States. We had a very small wedding and he sat quietly during the wedding, after giving away the bride. Of course he was the dominant figure there, without trying to be.

And at the reception he was so sweet with it all, because everybody there wanted to get their picture taken with him. He conversed with everyone, he was gentle to my family that were of course rather awed by the Vice President. But he has a great gift of tenderness around families of the people that he's involved with. He has a great sensitivity about families and mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters. He went out of his way to be so kind to my father and mother and my sister and my aunts and uncles, who were there. Invariably when people leave something like that, they say, "You know, I just never knew he was such a kind and sweet man." He really took his time to visit with them and make sure that pictures were taken and asking them to stand by him and let a picture be taken because he knew they would treasure it. This great gift of solicitude, of understanding of the needs of other people like that makes itself visible on more than one occasion.

B: Did you continue to see much of the Johnsons during the remainder of the vice presidential years?

V: Yes. As a matter of fact, from June '62 until November '63 really dates the period of growing intimacy between myself and the Johnsons because of my marriage to Mary Margaret. It doesn't seem like a long time, but in that year and four months we saw the Johnsons more than frequently. Practically every weekend they were in Texas, whenever they were there, we were invited up. I went to several affairs in Washington that the Johnsons had. In September '62, Mary Margaret went with him on his trip to Greece and Turkey and Iran and Istanbul. He invited Mary Margaret and me to go with him as Vice President to the inauguration of Juan Bosch as the President of the Dominican Republic.

B: Were you a part of the working crew on these?

V: Yes. Mary Margaret went along and worked as a secretary, and I was an aide. Then he took us with him, again working as part of the crew, to the funeral of Pope John in Rome. So this period of this sixteen months was the gestation period for my great knowledge of the Vice President and, hopefully I can say, his growing awareness of me as someone of value to him. I say that--I guess that happened, I'm not sure, but I'd think that would be; otherwise, he would not have carried me to Washington.

B: I'd like to insert here what amounts to some subjective kind of questions, such as, was Mr. Johnson obviously restive as Vice President? Was he unhappy in the job?

V: I've often thought about that. You see, I think one thing that I've learned about Lyndon Johnson is that while you may not think it, he has tremendous disciplinary powers. When he harnesses all of these forces and deploys them within him, he is the master of his emotions. I say that to make a point. The point is this: when he chooses to shroud his innermost feelings and when he determines to put forward a facade or an image or some visible demeanor, he has the capability to do it. I've seen him under very difficult conditions, when he's the coolest man in the room. I've often said that Johnson is at his best under moments of great pressure when ordinary men begin to unbuckle and to unravel. He at that moment reaches his finest peaks of power over himself. All of this to illustrate the point, is, no, I was not aware of any restiveness within Lyndon Johnson. I suspect that it must have been there for a number of reasons.

Number one, I think that to be all-powerful in your own environment and then to be the extension of another man, to do his bidding

is rather a wide gulf between what you had and enjoyed and what you are and must endure.

Second, later on I found out, I think the Kennedy White House staff treated Johnson with a rather loose contempt that was nowhere visible in the treatment of Humphrey by the Johnson White House staff. Indeed, they could not have been more disparate in the treatment.

B: But while he was Vice President, Mr. Johnson showed no signs of hurt or resentment?

V: Not to me, not that was visible. He did his job, he never seemed to be resentful. I never, ever heard him ever criticize President Kennedy. Indeed, I recall one time at his ranch--the name's escaped me--where one of his guests became vitriolic about Kennedy, and he damn near ordered him out of the house and made it clear that no one would make statements about the President of the United States in his presence.

I often recall this because I think it's a great act of respect that he had, not only for John Kennedy as a man but for the President which permeates all that Lyndon Johnson does. There's a great deep respect of the presidency that, if anything, is even stronger now.

So I never found either by word or deed, by gesture or demeanor, any outward sign of massive frustration, discontent. I never saw this. It may well have been there.

B: Anything else stand out in your mind about the vice presidential years, the time before November '63? Any anecdotes from those trips?

V: No, I don't recall them offhand. I do recall him saying when we were in the funeral mass for Pope John--it really was an interminable mass, it just went on and on and on and on--I remember the Vice President

saying when he got out, "If there would have been one more prayer, my back would have caved in. You Catholics! When you send a man on, you make sure you don't overlook anything." And that's true. We prayed forever.

B: We are up in time to the assassination. Do you want to go ahead now, or another session?

V: I think that that's really such a long one we ought to take it another session because I need to sketch out what's really important, to sketch out the pre-November 22 happenings because they have to do with, you understand, the event, which was an act of confluence, as it were, between the entry of Johnson and Kennedy into Texas, was the dinner for Albert Thomas in Houston that I handled. And also the preparation of a program for Austin at the Vice President's specific request, and which really, if I hadn't been so involved in that Austin affair, I don't know how close I would have been after that, because the Vice President asked me to do the impossible. He asked me to put together a first-class program for Austin about seventy-two hours before the event, because whoever was handling it had botched it. I literally worked myself and my people around the clock two and a half days, and we did it and finished it and printed it. I've often wondered whatever happened to any of those programs. I've tried to get my hands on one. They were never distributed and to this hour I don't know where one is.

B: Ironically enough, I have a ticket to that dinner.

V: Do you?

B: Another man I interviewed kept a group of the tickets to the dinner in Austin as souvenirs and gave me one. It was Byron Skelton.

V: If you run across anybody that has a copy of that program, nobody ever

read it--but the point that I'm making is, the reason that's important, is because he asked me to ride to Fort Worth with him that night to discuss the Austin affair in general, and politics. I'd given him a copy of the program and he was so pleased with it, and he told my wife, "You know, this husband of yours is a guy"--one of his familiar phrases-- "who is a can-do man. He just did the impossible, and he has done it with great skill, and I just cannot tell you how grateful I am." That's what he said. So all of that bears on it.

B: We can take that up again.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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